DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 281 370 FL 016 647

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TITLE A Lingua Franca for Africa. Esperanto Documents No. 36A.
INSTITUTION Universal Esperanto Association, Rotterdam (Netherlands).
PUB DATE 86
NOTE 19p.
AVAILABLE FROM Universal Esperanto Association, Nieuwe Binnenweg 176, 3015 BJ Rotterdam, Netherlands (Hfl. 3.00 and 10 percent postage and handling; bulk prices available).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Developing Nations; English (Second Language); Foreign Countries; *Intercultural Communication; Language Maintenance; Language of Instruction; Language Planning; *Language Role; *Native Language Instruction; *Official Languages; Second Language Instruction; Uncommonly Taught Languages
IDENTIFIERS *Africa; *Esperanto

ABSTRACT

The actual possibilities for communication among Africans are unsatisfactory. While the north has adopted Arabic as its lingua franca, most African states south of the Sahara still use the language(s) of their former colonial masters as official languages, thereby neglecting their native languages. This situation excludes many people from higher education because of language difficulties, perpetuating a kind of cultural imperialism, and splitting the continent into different language blocs. Every African child should be taught his native language or the language of the immediate environment through the end of secondary school, but Africa also needs a lingua franca. English and other European languages are inappropriate for a variety of reasons, and many native languages pose political problems. However, Esperanto would satisfy Africa's need for a politically neutral, easy-to-learn, well-developed, and rich language and could be successful if its introduction were well-planned and gradually executed. It should first be propagated privately, especially among teachers and teacher trainers, then introduced as an optional school subject, then be made a compulsory school subject, and finally be used as a medium of instruction. The history and development of Esperanto are explored, and examples of the language's grammatical structure are included. (MSE)

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ED281370

ISSN 0165-2575

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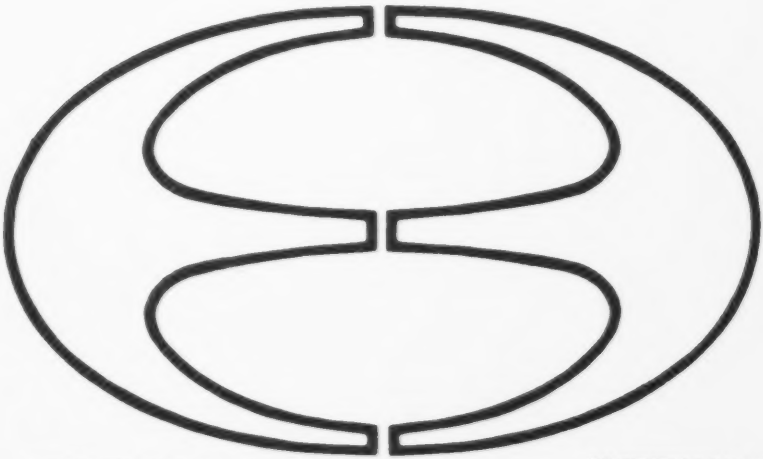

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Esperanto Documents 36 A

Rotterdam 1986

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Number of copies of one document	**Price per copy (Hfl.)**
3 – 99	2.00
100 – 199	1.75
200 – 299	1.50
300 – 399	1.25
400 – 500	1.00

To these prices approximately 10% should be added for postage and packing.

Esperanto Documents, nr. 36A (1986)

A LINGUA FRANCA FOR AFRICA

Helga Farukuoye

1. PROBLEMS OF COMMUNICATION AND LANGUAGE TRAINING

1.1. Introduction

The actual possibilities for communication among Africans are far from satisfactory. As Claude Piron, a lecturer at the University of Geneva and a former United Nations translator, has stated:

> There is something depressing in watching two Africans trying to communicate by gestures, when one, a Rwandese — with Kinyargwanda as his mother tongue — has made the effort of assimilating Swahili and French, and the other, a Nigerian, is capable of using, besides the Agatu of his native village, three languages as important as Hausa, Arabic and English. The total of languages spoken by the two of them amounts to seven, and they have devoted years to drilling themselves in the correct handling of difficult rules of grammar and inconsistent vocabularies; yet they stand together as though separated by an insuperable barrier. [Piron, p. 1; Eichholz, p. 282]

Whereas the North of Africa has adopted Arabic, most African states south of the Sahara still use the language(s) of their former colonial masters as official languages, more or less neglecting their mother tongues, excluding many people from higher studies because of language difficulties, perpetuating involuntarily a kind of

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cultural imperialism and splitting the continent into different language blocs. Let us look at these disadvantages in greater detail.

1.2. The importance of the mother tongue

Learning a new language is more than simply acquiring a new nomenclature for concepts already developed. It means nothing less than seeing the world with new eyes, forming a series of new concepts. For example, when describing family relationships the Englishman generally distinguishes only the sex: *brother, sister*, whereas the Yoruba is more interested in the distinction of age: *ẹ̀gbọ́n* ("elder brother or sister"), *àbúrò* ("younger brother or sister").

Given the cultural impact of languages, it cannot be emphasized too strongly that every African child should be taught, at the primary level, in his or her mother tongue, or, if this is impossible, in the language of the immediate environment. This first language of instruction should be continued as a compulsory subject until the end of secondary school. Only in this way can one avoid the terrible alienation of the kind described with great mastery in Cheikh Hamidou Kane's novel *L'aventure ambiguë*. There need be no fear that emphasis on the mother tongue will detract from a student's ability to acquire a second language. As Jacques Champion points out [pp. 11-15], experience has shown that, after independence, anglophone countries have been much more successful in spreading English through their mass literacy campaigns where the initial instruction was given in the mother tongue, than francophone countries, where African languages are omitted, have been with French. Most of the children who had been taught exclusively in French fell back to complete illiteracy and were unable to communicate in French if they stopped schooling after the primary level.

1.3. English and other European languages

It is unfortunate indeed that international organizations like the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the World Health Organization and Unesco, which are supposed to contribute extensively to the improvement of the standard of living

and education in third world countries, spend a substantial part of their budget on mere translation of texts. According to Harry and Mandel [Eichholz, pp. 236-263], "Language services at United Nations headquarters in New York are estimated to have cost twenty-seven million dollars in 1976, or 7.5 % of the regular budget". The situation in the specialized agencies is as bad or worse.

African states cannot reasonably agree to a similar wastage of their limited resources as they try to intensify contacts and collaboration among themselves. The need for a common language becomes more and more urgent. In countries where the various ethnic groups cannot settle on one national language, such a *lingua franca* might serve both as an international means of communication and also as the official language of the country in question, thereby avoiding duplication of effort and expense.

It is also disheartening to see such an important language as Hausa essentially splitting in two because of the different superstrata in Niger and Nigeria. About 30 % of the Hausa vocabulary used in Nigeria consists of English loan words, whereas French expressions play a major role in the Hausa spoken in Niger. The situation of European languages in Africa is ambiguous in a number of respects. English, for example, can only be regarded as a provisional solution in the countries in which it is used for secondary and higher education. Three arguments, particularly, come to mind in this regard.

First, English continues to be subject to misuse as a language of neocolonialism. Why should the anglophone countries of Africa remain under the pressing influence of a single European culture? Why should the teaching of literature other than African literature be confined to Shakespeare and other English authors? A similar problem exists for the francophone and lusophone countries.

Second, although the basic grammar of English is relatively easy, it is not easy enough to give Africans ready access to needed knowledge, for example in the sciences. We need only mention its archaic and inconsistent orthography and its bewildering stock of vocabulary and idiomatic expressions to make the reader aware of the problem. As for French and Portuguese, their difficult basic grammar forms the major stumbling block.

Though Nigerian students are admitted to the university only

with qualifications in English language and after having passed the JAMB examination, in which the use of English is tested, many of them have insufficient command of the language to handle scientific texts with profit. This is partly due to the British educational system, in which students are promoted according to the average of the marks obtained in the various subjects. The situation seems somewhat better among francophone countries, where a secondary school student must obtain pass marks in all subjects every year, but the result is, of course, a higher drop-out rate.

Third, English, though widespread, does not guarantee direct communication with all African countries nor with the rest of the world. Nor, for political reasons, is it ever likely to reach such a situation. Even among English speakers differences of pronunciation can cause problems, especially for non-natives. Nigerian English, compared with the Received Standard English of the United Kingdom, has given up certain phonemic distinctions. Thus *cat* sounds like *cut*, *cut* sounds like *cot*, *have* sounds like *half*, and *suit* may even sound like *sweet*. French, more uniform in pronunciation, is none the less weaker internationally than English. For Portuguese the learner must distinguish between Latin American and European forms.

1.4. The African Languages

Naturally every African country would like to have an African language as its national language, but in many countries ethnic rivalry makes dangerous every attempt to introduce one indigenous language as *lingua franca*. One could hardly imagine Southern Nigeria accepting Hausa. Such an imposition would risk splitting the country into two parts. Tanzania merits much praise for the introduction of Swahili. In fact, Swahili has given a feeling of national unity to the different ethnic groups of that country [Whiteley, pp. 101-115], but the same language encountered serious opposition in parts of Uganda, where the Christian Baganda rejected it because of its association with Islam [Whiteley, pp. 69-70].

Giving one ethnic group an undue advantage and tied to a certain extent to one religion, Swahili is insufficiently neutral to be accepted easily as *lingua franca* for the whole of Africa. As for Hausa

or Arabic, these two disadvantages are even more obvious. It is also doubtful whether the assimilation of any of those three languages could be easier and quicker than that of English. Africans whose mother tongue is one of the widespread Niger-Kordofanian phylum [Hansford, pp. 16-17, 169-184] would find Swahili, or Hausa or Arabic, particularly different — in both structure and vocabulary — from the language(s) they know. In the near future, Swahili or Hausa could also not overcome the predominance of English (or French) in all areas of science. Tanzania is still struggling with this problem [Whitely, pp. 99 ff].

2. A SOLUTION

2.1. The International Language Esperanto

What Africa in particular, and the whole world in general, needs, is a politically neutral, easy-to-learn and nevertheless well developed and rich means of communication. Such a language already exists, and has been in existence for almost a century. Its name is Esperanto. Some may call it an artificial language, but for my linguistic feeling it is as natural as every national language — and I can consider it really as my second mother tongue, because I learned it from my parents at a very early age.

Unlike standard Yoruba, which is based on the Oyo dialect, and French, which developed from the Gallo-Romanic dialect of the "Ile-de-France" (Paris and surroundings) and has been imposed, mainly after the French Revolution of 1789, on the whole country, standard German was created as an artificial language from a mixture of different dialects and propagated by the Luther Bible. But who would dare to state that the language of such an outstanding poet as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe lacks natural life and expressiveness?

Since Esperanto is not very well known in Africa, let us present a sketch of its origin and history as well as its structure and actual use.

Ludvik Lazar Zamenhof, the author of this language, or better — as he preferred to call himself — its initiator, was born on December 15, 1859, as son of a language teacher in a little Polish town called Bialystok. Being a member of the Jewish minority, he felt continuous discrimination, but also witnessed the plight of another minority group, the Germans, and even of the Polish inhabitants, suffering under the yoke of Russian occupation, not to speak of the Lithuanians, in whose original homeland the town was situated and whose language had already been banned. After the joint but nevertheless unsuccessful rebellion of the Polish and Lithuanian aristocrats in 1863, the Russian authorities followed the politics of *divide ut imperes*, thus increasing the clash between the different ethnic groups.

Already as an adolescent Zamenhof realized that it was mainly language barriers that allowed such a wicked political strategy to

work. Therefore he searched for a way out of the dilemma by finding a neutral means of understanding. He himself had learned Hebrew, Polish, Russian, German and French during his childhood, Latin and Greek in secondary school. Latin, the *lingua franca* of the European Middle Ages, proved to be far too difficult for the common person, and interaction and understanding should not be limited to an elite.

When Zamenhof started learning English in form five, he was surprised to see that a rich language does not need difficult declensions and conjugations, and he concluded that a simple and logical grammar could be invented and that the vocabulary for a neutral language could be taken from internationally known roots. In fact, the whole Esperanto grammar can be explained within two hours, and almost two thirds of the Esperanto vocabulary are derived from Latin and the Romance languages, almost one third from the Germanic languages (especially from German and English).

There remained the problem of the abundance of words a fully developed language needs. How could they ever be learned in a short time? A simple observation made in form six or seven of secondary school gave him — with the speed of lightning — the key to a very efficient solution. Walking in the street one day he read the signs along the way: first *svejcarskaja* ("porter's lodge") and then *konditorskaja* ("cake shop, confectioner's shop"). These *-skaja* taught him that a few dozen suffixes and prefixes having always the same sense, when combined with some hundred word roots, could produce thousands of words without extra learning.

He started in earnest to elaborate an international language and celebrated its birth in 1878 with his classmates of form eight (the last in secondary school). His father let him do so, but not for long. Warned by friends not to allow the son to squander his talents on utopian ideas, the father forced the young man to leave his manuscripts behind when he went to Moscow to study medicine and to promise to put such matters aside until his studies were completed. Young Zamenhof obeyed at first and studied very diligently, but after some years his conscience forbade him to wait anymore. As his father had meanwhile burned his manuscripts, in summer 1881 he started to rewrite his project from memory and spent six years improving the new language without telling anybody about it.

He translated parts of prose and verse literature from the different languages he knew and wrote original articles and even poems. To make sure that the international language became melodious and therefore pleasing to the ear, he read aloud for himself what he had just written down. Finally, when he was already a doctor and oculist, he published the first booklet entitled *Lingvo internacia* under the pseudonym "Doktoro Esperanto" (the doctor who is hoping) in July 1887, with the financial help of his father-in-law. This booklet contained a preface, the alphabet, the grammar in 16 rules, some texts, and 947 word roots. It was written in Russian, but Polish, German and French editions followed during the same year.

Within a few months Zamenhof got hundreds of positive reactions, mostly from persons who immediately started learning the new language; and in 1889 he could already publish the addresses of a thousand Esperantists. In 1893 Zamenhof's *Universala vortaro* appeared, containing 2 687 word roots. This dictionary, together with the first booklet, became the foundation of Esperanto, approved by the participants of the first world congress of Esperanto in 1905 in the French town Boulogne-sur-Mer. The same congress also set up two committees, one for language problems and another for the organization of the annual international congresses.

Also in these first years the Esperanto movement acquired a strong ethical background called *interna ideo*. It consists of mutual tolerance and friendship between all people of different nationalities, professing different religions or philosophical concepts and having divergent political ideas.

It would lead us too far afield to follow in detail the history of Esperanto and its supporters. Zamenhof died in 1917, but the language initiated by him developed into a full-fledged means of human expression (including literature and the sciences) and it spread over the whole world despite terrible setbacks in two world wars.

Nowadays Esperanto speakers can be found in almost every country of the world. Their total number amounts to several million. The language is officially admitted as a subject for secondary schools in a number of countries and taught in different universities and colleges. Esperanto is broadcast by some radio stations and is beginning to be used as a link-language in automatic translation. It

can boast of a variety of magazines and journals and a respectable original literature of prose fiction, poetry and drama, supported by scientific articles and specialized dictionaries on a large range of subjects.

Most of the essential works of world literature are available in Esperanto translation. As for original literature, it enjoys a particularly lively existence among authors whose native language is little known internationally, e.g. Hungarian or Japanese. About such countries we read very little in the one-sided manuals of world literature written in different European languages. The total number of book-length publications in Esperanto probably exceeds 30 000 titles. The International Esperanto Museum in Vienna, which forms a part of the Austrian National Library, possesses more than 17 000 volumes.

Several thousand people meet at Esperanto congresses, held in different places each year. Every year, at the International Congress University, lecturers present papers in the language on various subjects. The International Telecommunications Union recognizes Esperanto as a "clear" language for telegrams and cables. By its resolution of December 10, 1954, Unesco acknowledged "the results attained by Esperanto in the field of international intellectual relations and in the rapprochement of the peoples of the world", and in November 1985 it reaffirmed this recognition and called for increased use of the language in international organizations and in schools.

The Universal Esperanto Association, founded in 1908, renders, through its worldwide network of voluntary representatives, multiple services to the growing community of Esperanto-users. Other organizations bring people with specialized interests together. There are special organizations for teachers, scientists, Catholics, Christians of different denominations, socialists, railway workers, and so on.

Let us now cast a glance at the grammatical structure, which will help us understand why this language constitutes an excellent means of logical training and why it can be essentially mastered after only one year of study by anybody who knows at least one European language. It is even more astonishing — and for Africans highly encouraging — to see that people whose mother tongue stands outside

the Indo-European language family, the Japanese, for example, can learn Esperanto within two years, though they need no less than ten years to obtain an equivalent knowledge of English.

Esperanto has a phonetic orthography. All multisyllabic words are stressed on the penultimate syllable. The ending of a word shows the part of speech to which it belongs: all nouns end in *-o*, all adjectives end in *-a*. Such a consistent system makes us more aware than usual of the inconsistencies shown by other languages.

ESPERANTO	ENGLISH	FRENCH
frato	brother	frère
frata	fraternal	fraternel
legi	read	lire
legebla	legible	lisible
vidi	see	voir
nevidebla	invisible	invisible

Instead of the elaborate conjugations of verbs in other languages, Esperanto uses only five endings for all the simple tenses together. Take for example the verb *esti* = to be:

mi estas	=	I am
vi estas	=	you are
li, ŝi, ĝi estas	=	he, she, it is
ni estas	=	we are
ili estas	=	they are
mi estis	=	I was
mi estos	=	I shall be
mi estus	=	I would be
estu !	=	be !

These simple verb forms are the ones mostly used, but a logical system of combined verb forms makes provision for any kind of subtle temporal distinction. For example: *mi estus leginta* = I would have read; *la letero estis legota* = the letter was about to be read.

A final example will show how far one can go in applying affixes, which can be logically combined with a single word root. In his introduction to *Esperanto, Mittler der Weltliteratur* (Esperanto, mediator of world literature; pp. 19-22), Wilhelm Theodor Oeste derives more than 200 variations from the single root *"help-"*. Here are a few examples with approximate English translations:

helpi	=	to help
malhelpi	=	to hinder
helpadi	=	to help continuously
helpegi	=	to help a great deal
helpegadi	=	to help a great deal continuously
helpeti	=	to help somewhat
helpetadi	=	to help contiunuously somewhat
ekhelpi	=	to start helping
ekhelpegi	=	to start helping a great deal
rehelpi	=	to help again
remalhelpi	=	to hinder again
la helpo	=	the help
la malhelpo	=	the hindrance
la helpado	=	the continuous help
la ekhelpo	=	the start of helping
helpanto	=	(male) helper (now)
malhelpanto	=	a man who hinders (now)
helpinto	=	former (male) helper
helponto	=	(male) helper in the future
helpantino	=	(female) helper (now)
gehelpantoj	=	helpers of both sexes (now)
helpantaro	=	group of (male) helpers (now)
helpema	=	helpful
helpemo	=	readiness to help
helpato	=	somebody who is being helped
senhelpa	=	helpless
senmalhelpa	=	without hindrance

2.2. Esperanto and the Africans

After this short sketch let us come back to the African context. One objection may still be raised: besides its non-Indo-European structure (its agglutinative grammatical system resembles non-European languages such as Swahili), Esperanto remains a European language because of its word roots. This is indeed true. However, there is no other language in existence that can boast a greater degree of internationality.

Prof. Manfred Mayerhofer, of the Institute of Indo-European Languages at the University of Vienna, stated in 1969 in the journal of the Austrian Academy of Sciences: "For a real auxiliary world-

language only two alternatives are possible: the involuntary preference given to a certain cultural sphere by the choice of a language *a posteriori* (which is the case of Esperanto) or the construction of a language *a priori* based on universals which would in fact offer an 'equal chance' to all nations, i.e. the 'equal chance' for all to learn it with difficulty".

At various times the suggestion has been made that Africans should create their own *lingua franca*, but Mayerhofer's statement is clear: given the structural and lexical differences among African language groups, an artificial *lingua franca* based on them would surely not be easy to achieve. Decades would be needed to elaborate a viable and satisfactory project. And even then it could hardly become, because of its difficulty, the second language of the average African! Why should a newly introduced *lingua franca* again remain restricted to an elite — as the former colonial languages have been?

Esperanto and its literature have already been enriched by cultural influences from many countries of the world. Why should Africans not add their part? Why should Africans not use this practical means of communication, much as they accept, with careful planning, western technology?

There remains still another point to ponder. Even with an African *lingua franca* there would still exist the problem of communication with non-Africans. The major world powers are interested in propagating their own national languages, thus in effect preventing a general solution of the problem. By introducing Esperanto, Africa, joined by other non-aligned countries, could perhaps convince the whole world to bring a halt to linguistic imperialism. The introduction of one and the same second language for every human being would enhance progress as well as mutual understanding and therefore give a new chance to world-wide peaceful development. It would also cut educational costs and ease the transfer of technology.

Convinced of the utility of Esperanto, we must nonetheless be quite aware of the fact that its introduction can only be successful if well planned and gradually executed. Only a few suggestions can be made here. The first step will be to propagate it privately, especially among teachers and teacher trainers. The second step will bring —

at different levels, according to concrete local possibilities — its introduction as an optional subject in schools. The third step will make it a compulsory subject beside the former colonial language. Only in a fourth step might it replace this language as medium for instruction.

Primary schools in most African countries start in class one with their mother tongue only. Esperanto could be added in class two or three and become the language of tuition at the secondary level. Where an African language represents a homogeneous group of several million people in one region, the mother tongue may remain the language of tuition until the school certificate level. At the tertiary level, however, the same policy would become probably far too expensive, though it is desirable that Africans develop their mother tongue to the highest potential.

Language teachers should not fear unemployment because of the introduction of Esperanto. They are rather invited to adopt it as an additional subject for their profession. Moreover, the mother tongue and Esperanto form only the required minimum for communication. At secondary school level both African and modern European languages could be added as subjects to widen the cultural outlook of the children. They could be chosen according to the students' interests and probable professional orientation.

Language teachers will also realise that students, who have been trained in decoding linguistic structures by the consistent system of Esperanto, perform very well in decoding texts in modern European and even in African languages.

In conclusion, we would like to urge African countries to use their mother tongues as far as possible, and, at the same time, to consider Esperanto as *lingua franca* for themselves and for the world.

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Publication list of Esperanto Documents

No. Title

1. Unesco and the UEA (out of print)
2. Universal Esperanto Association, Annual Report 1974-75 (out of print)
3. The 60th Universal Congress of Esperanto
4. The development of poetic language in Esperanto
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